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SUBJECT: IRAQI WOMEN JOURNALISTS: LABOR ISSUES, NOT SECURITY,
PRESENT CHALLENGE

1.(U) SUMMARY: A group of Iraqi female journalists told Emboffs that their biggest professional concerns were unfair labor practices, lack of accountability within corporate management, and a patronage system that disregards performance. They called for laws to protect workers' rights, and clear and transparent court procedures to help guarantee those rights. END SUMMARY.

Unfair Labor Practices Dominate List of Concerns

2.(U) On August 26, Emboffs hosted a discussion with 13 Iraqi women journalists from Al Hurra TV, Attakhy newspaper, Aswat al-Iraq News Agency, BBC Arabic radio, IMN radio, Al-Iraqiya TV, Radio Sawa, Azzawra newspaper, Radio Nawa, Baghdad TV and Free Iraq Radio.

13. (U) The women briefly discussed freedom of speech issues, noting that constitutional guarantees must be enforced to protect their freedoms. Interestingly, the women did not fault the Iraqi government for suppressing their freedom of expression, but instead faulted their stations' corporate management. One correspondent from Al-Iraqiya lamented that management at her station interfered in her work on a daily basis and that the directors "treated (her) like a slave." This led to a lengthy discussion on the issue of workplace rights, with all the woman agreeing that unfair labor practices were prevalent within their organizations.

14. (U) As an example, the correspondent from IMN radio described a warning she had received from her supervisor after applying for vacation time. Few, if any, of the women had taken leave in the past two years, either out of fear of losing their jobs or because their leave had been denied. While this correspondent mentioned that her male colleague had been allowed to take a vacation, she noted that he was a friend of her supervisor's and that generally the problem cut across gender lines. Another correspondent admitted that she was working without a contract and therefore had no formal guarantee of her rights. A third complained that her boss treated her with disrespect and threatened to terminate her employment because of her personal relationships with certain Iraqi officials; others agreed that relationships and affiliations outside of the office often caused trouble inside the office. All of the women said that they felt pressure to adhere to company practices, whether legal or not, in order to keep their jobs, and that the indirect threat of arbitrary termination was always present.

Courts Provide No Remedy

15. (U) In the few cases where labor related lawsuits have gone forward, the women said that justice has not been done because judges are corrupt. The correspondent from Radio Nawa said that she had sued her former employer for an unfair dismissal, however, she claimed she lost the case because the employer bribed the judge. Another woman from Al-Iraqiya agreed, saying that proper procedures

are not followed and that there is no transparency in the court system. Both said that the laws and courts protected employers, and employers were not accountable to anyone but themselves and/or their political parties.

Qualifications Overshadowed by Patronage System

¶6. (U) All of the women at the event were well-educated, experienced journalists. Many of them had worked in the field for ten or more years. They angrily recounted stories of people being hired in their organizations based on personal friendships, family relationships and even physical attractiveness. One woman fumed that there was no value to qualifications, and that "women are analyzed according to the services they offer to the director!" They lamented the corruption within their organizations, noting that "international standards are clearly absent in Iraq."

"The Employment Culture in Iraq Must Change"

¶7. (U) The women all agreed that stronger labor laws were needed to protect workers. They said that both employer and employee rights and responsibilities should be clearly spelled out in employment contracts. They also agreed that equal opportunity principles should be incorporated into the law. Courts must follow regulated, transparent procedures, and corruption in the justice system must be stamped out, they added. As one participant summarized, rule of law must be respected, and "the employment culture in Iraq must change."

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Comment

¶8. (U) The women were clearly excited about the meeting, with one commenting that "even my own government doesn't listen to me!" The level of complaints was not surprising, however, the nature of the complaints was. Poloff asked the women what was the primary impediment to their work. Rather than discussing the alarming number of targeted assassinations against journalists this year, or the harassment and detention of journalists in Kurdistan, the women immediately seized on labor issues. Security concerns only came up twice in the meeting, both times as a secondary issue that was quickly dismissed. One woman summed up her attitude, saying that she accepted the risk and could sacrifice her life for Iraq. However, if she was going to risk so much for her work, then the working conditions had to at least be tolerable. Poloff shared the concerns raised by the women with NDI, which agreed to prioritize assistance for the COR Committee on Labor and Services.

¶9. (U) Poloff agreed to discuss their concerns with parliamentarians and other Iraqi officials. The women were pleased with the session, and requested similar meetings on a monthly basis to share insights and concerns.

SPECKHARD